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ON RE-READING WALTER PATER

BY RICHARD LE GALLIENNE

It is with no small satisfaction, and with a sense of reassurance of which one may, in moods of misgiving, have felt the need during two decades of the Literature of Noise, that one sees a writer so pre-eminently a master of the Literature of Meditation coming, for all the captains and the shouting, so surely into his own. The acceptance of Walter Pater is not merely widening all the time, but it is more and more becoming an acceptance such as he himself would have most valued, an acceptance in accordance with the full significance of his work rather than a one-sided appreciation of some of its Corinthian characteristics. The Doric qualities of his work are becoming recognized also, and he is being read, as he has always been read by his true disciples—so not inappropriately to name those who have come under his graver spell—not merely as a *prosateur* of purple patches, or a sophist of honeyed counsels tragically easy to misapply, but as an artist of the interpretative imagination of rare insight and magic, a writer of deep humanity as well as esthetic beauty, and the teacher of a way of life at once ennobling and exquisite. It is no longer possible to parody him—after the fashion of Mr. Mallock's brilliancy in *The New Republic*—as a writer of "all manner and no matter," nor is it possible any longer to confuse his philosophy with those gospels of unrestrained libertinism which have taken in vain the name of Epicurus. His highly wrought, sensitively colored, and musically expressive style is seen to be what it is because of its truth to a matter profound and delicate and intensely meditated and such faults as it has come rather of too much matter than too little; while his teaching, far from being that of a facile "Epicureanism," is seen, properly understood, to involve something like the austerity of a fastidious Puritanism, and

to result in a jealous asceticism of the senses rather than in their indulgence. "Slight as was the burden of positive moral obligation with which he had entered Rome," he writes of Marius, as on his first evening in Rome the murmur comes to him of "the lively, reckless call to 'play,' from the sons and daughters of foolishness," "it was to no wasteful and vagrant affections, such as these, that his Epicureanism had committed him." Such warnings against misunderstanding Pater is careful to place, at, so to say, all the cross-roads in his books, so scrupulously concerned is he lest any reader should take the wrong turning. Few writers, indeed, manifest so constant a consideration for, and, in minor matters, such a sensitive courtesy toward, their readers, while in matters of conscience Pater seems to feel for them an actual pastoral responsibility. His well-known withdrawal of the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* from its second edition, from a fear that "it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall," is but one of many examples of his solicitude; and surely such as have gone astray after such painstaking guidance have but their own natures to blame. As he justly says, again of Marius, "in the reception of metaphysical *formule*, all depends, as regards their actual and ulterior result, on the pre-existent qualities of that soil of human nature into which they fall—the company they find already present there, on their admission into the house of thought."

That Pater's philosophy could ever have been misunderstood is not to be entertained with patience by any one who has read him with even ordinary attention; that it may have been misapplied, in spite of all his care, is, of course, possible; but if a writer is to be called to account for all the misapplications, or distortions, of his philosophy, writing may as well come to an end. Yet, inconceivable as it may sound, a critic very properly held in popular esteem recently gave it as his opinion that the teaching of Walter Pater was responsible for the tragic career of the author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Certainly that remarkable man was an "epicurean"—but one, to quote Meredith, "whom Epicurus would have scourged out of his garden"; and the statement made by the critic in question that *The Renaissance* is the book referred to in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as having had a sinister influence over its hero is so easily disposed of by a reference to that romance itself

that it is hard to understand its ever having been made. Here is the passage describing the demoralizing book in question:

"His eye fell on the yellow book that Lord Henry had sent him. . . . It was the strangest book he had ever read. It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed.

"It was a novel without a plot, and with only one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own, and to sum up, as it were, in himself the various moods through which the world-spirit had ever passed, loving for their mere artificiality those renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue, as much as those natural rebellions that wise men still call sin. The style in which it was written was that curious jeweled style, vivid and obscure at once, full of *argot* and of archaisms, of technical expressions and of elaborate paraphrases, that characterizes the work of some of the finest artists of the French school of *Décadents*. There were in it metaphors as monstrous as orchids, and as evil in color. The life of the senses was described in the terms of mystical philosophy. One hardly knew at times whether one was reading the spiritual ecstasies of some medieval saint or the morbid confessions of a modern sinner. It was a poisonous book. The heavy odor of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain. The mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it was of complex refrains and movements elaborately repeated, produced in the mind of the lad, as he passed from chapter to chapter, a form of reverie, a malady of dreaming, that made him unconscious of the falling day and the creeping shadows. . . .

"For years Dorian Gray could not free himself from the memory of this book. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he never sought to free himself from it. He procured from Paris no less than five large paper copies of the first edition, and had them bound in different colors, so that they might suit his various moods and the changing fancies of a nature over which he seemed, at times, to have almost entirely lost control."

The book thus characterized is obviously by a French writer—I have good reason for thinking that it was *À Rebours* by Huysmans—and how any responsible reader can have imagined that Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* answers to this description passes all understanding. A critic guilty of so patent a misstatement must either never have read *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or never have read *The Renaissance*. On the other hand, if on other more reliable evidence it can be found that Oscar Wilde was one of those

"young men" misled by Pater's book, for whose spiritual safety Pater, as we have seen, was so solicitous, one can only remind oneself again of the phrase quoted above in regard to "that soil of human nature" into which a writer casts his seed. If that which was sown a lily comes up a toadstool, there is evidently something wrong with the soil.

Let us briefly recall what this apparently so "dangerous" philosophy of Pater's is, and we cannot do better than examine it in its most concentrated and famous utterance, this oft-quoted passage from that once-suppressed "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*:

"Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated dramatic life. How may we see in them all that there is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy? To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. . . . While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colors, and curious odors, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend. . . . With this sense of the splendor of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch. . . . Well! we are all *condamnés*, as Victor Hugo says: *we are all under sentence of death, but with a sort of indefinite reprieve—les hommes sont tous condamnés à mort avec des sursis indéfinis*: we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among 'the children of this world,' in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion—that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake."

Now, if it be true that the application, or rather the misapplication, of this philosophy led Oscar Wilde to Reading Gaol, it is none the less true that another application of it led Marius to something like Christian martyrdom, and Walter Pater himself along an ever loftier and serener path of spiritual vision.

Nothing short of wilful misconstruction can make of the

counsel thus offered, with so priestly a concern that the writer's exact meaning be brought home to his reader, other than an inspiration toward a noble employment of that mysterious opportunity we call life. For those of us, perhaps more than a few, who have no assurance of the leisure of an eternity for idleness or experiment, this expansion and elevation of the doctrine of the moment, carrying a merely sensual and trivial moral in the Horatian maxim of *carpe diem*, is one thrillingly charged with exhilaration and sounding a solemn and yet seductive challenge to us to make the most indeed, but also to make the best, of our little day. To make the most, and to make the best, of life! Those who misinterpret or misapply Pater forget his constant insistence on the second half of that precept. We are to get "as many pulsations as possible into the given time," but we are to be very careful that our use of those pulsations shall be the finest. Whether or not it is "simply for those moments' sake," our attempt must be to give "*the highest quality*," remember, to those "moments as they pass." And who can fail to remark the fastidious care with which Pater selects various typical interests which he deems most worthy of dignifying the moment? The senses are, indeed, of natural right, to have their part; but those interests on which the accent of Pater's pleading most persuasively falls are not so much the "strange dyes, strange colors, and curious odors," but rather "the face of one's friend," ending his subtly musical sentence with a characteristic shock of simplicity, almost incongruity—or "some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement," or "any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment." There is surely a great gulf fixed between this lofty preoccupation with great human emotions and high spiritual and intellectual excitements, and a vulgar gospel of "eat, drink, for to-morrow we die," whether or not both counsels start out from a realization of "the awful brevity" of our mortal day. That realization may prompt certain natures to unbridled sensuality. Doomed to perish as the beasts, they choose, it would seem with no marked reluctance, to live the life of the beast, a life apparently not without its satisfactions. But it is as stupid as it is infamous to pretend that such natures as these find any warrant for their tragic libertinism in Walter Pater. They may, indeed, have found esthetic pleasure in

the reading of his prose, but the truth of which that prose is but the beautiful garment has passed them by. For such it can hardly be claimed that they have translated into action the aspiration of this tenderly religious passage:

“Given the hardest terms, supposing our days are indeed but a shadow, even so we may well adorn and beautify, in scrupulous self-respect, our souls and whatever our souls touch upon—these wonderful bodies, these material dwelling-places through which the shadows pass together for a while, the very raiment we wear, our very pastimes, and the intercourse of society.”

Here in this passage from *Marius* we find, to use Pater's own words once more, “the spectacle of one of the happiest temperaments coming, so to speak, to an understanding with the most depressing of theories.” That theory, of course, was the doctrine of the perpetual flux of things as taught by Aristippus of Cyrene, making a man of the world's practical application of the old Heraclitean formula, his influence depending on this, “that in him an abstract doctrine, originally somewhat acrid, had fallen upon a rich and genial nature, well fitted to transform it into a theory of practice of considerable stimulative power toward a fair life.” Such, too, was Pater's nature, and such his practical usefulness as what one might call a philosophical artist. Meredith, Emerson, Browning, and even Carlyle were artists so far related to him and each other in that each of them wrought a certain optimism, or, at all events, a courageous and even blithe working theory of life and conduct, out of the unrelenting facts of existence unflinchingly faced, rather than ecclesiastically smoothed over—the facts of death and pain and struggle, and even the cruel mystery that surrounds with darkness and terror our mortal lot. Each one of them deliberately faced the worst, and with each, after his own nature, the worst returned to laughter. The force of all these men was in their artistic or poetic embodiment of philosophical conceptions, but had they not been artists and poets their philosophical conceptions would have made but little way. And it is time to recall, what critics preoccupied with his “message” leave unduly in the background, that Pater was an artist of remarkable power and fascination, a maker of beautiful things, which, whatever their philosophical content, have for our spirits the refreshment and edification which all beauty mysteriously brings us, merely because it is beauty. *Marius the*

Epicurean is a great and wonderful book, not merely on account of its teaching, but because it is simply one of the most *beautiful* books, perhaps the most beautiful book, written in English. It is beautiful in many ways. It is beautiful, first of all, in the uniquely personal quality of its prose, prose which is at once austere and sensuous, simple at once and elaborate, scientifically exact and yet mystically suggestive, cool and hushed as sanctuary marble, sweet-smelling as sanctuary incense; prose that has at once the qualities of painting and of music, rich in firmly visualized pictures, yet moving to subtle, half-submerged rhythms, and expressive with every delicate accent and cadence; prose highly wrought, and yet singularly surprising one at times with, so to say, sudden innocencies, artless and instinctive beneath all its sedulous art. It is no longer necessary, as I hinted above, to fight the battle of this prose. Whether it appeal to one or not, no critic worth attention any longer disparages it as mere ornate and perfumed verbiage, the elaborate mannerism of a writer hiding the poverty of his thought beneath a pretentious raiment of decorated expression. It is understood to be the organic utterance of one with a vision of the world all his own striving through words, as he best can, to make that vision visible to others as nearly as possible as he himself sees it. Pater himself has expounded his theory and practice of prose, doubtless with a side-thought of self-justification, in various places up and down his writings, notably in his pregnant essay on "Style," and perhaps even more persuasively in the chapter called "Euphuism" in *Marius*. In this last he thus goes to the root of the matter:

"That preoccupation of the *dilettante* with what might seem mere details of form, after all, did but serve the purpose of bringing to the surface, sincerely and in their integrity, certain strong personal intuitions, a certain vision or apprehension of things as really being, with important results, thus, rather than thus—intuitions which the artistic or literary faculty was called upon to follow, with the exactness of wax or clay, clothing the model within."

This striving to express the truth that is in him has resulted in a beauty of prose which for individual quality must be ranked with the prose of such masters as De Quincey and Lamb, and, to make a not irrelevant comparison, above the very fine prose of his contemporary Stevenson, by virtue of its greater personal sincerity.

There is neither space here, nor need, to illustrate this opinion by quotation, though it may not be amiss, the musical and decorative qualities of Pater's prose having been so generally dwelt upon, to remind the reader of the magical simplicities by which it is no less frequently characterized. Some of his quietest, simplest phrases have a wonderful evocative power: "the long reign of these quiet Antonines," for example; "the thunder which had sounded all day among the hills"; "far into the night, when heavy rain-drops had driven the last lingerers home"; "Flavian was no more. The little marble chest with its dust and tears lay cold among the faded flowers." What could be simpler than these brief sentences, yet how peculiarly suggestive they are; what immediate pictures they make! And this magical simplicity is particularly successful in his descriptive passages, notably of natural effects, effects caught with an instinctively selected touch or two, an expressive detail, a gray or colored word. How lightly sketched, and yet how clearly realized in the imagination, is the ancestral country-house of Marius's boyhood, "White-Nights," "that exquisite fragment of a once large and sumptuous villa"—"Two centuries of the play of the sea-wind were in the velvet of the mosses which lay along its inaccessible ledges and angles." Take again this picture:

"The cottagers still lingered at their doors for a few minutes as the shadows grew larger, and went to rest early; though there was still a glow along the road through the shorn corn-fields, and the birds were still awake about the crumbling gray heights of an old temple."

And again this picture of a wayside inn:

"The room in which he sat down to supper, unlike the ordinary Roman inns at that day, was trim and sweet. The firelight danced cheerfully upon the polished three-wicked *lucernæ* burning cleanly with the best oil, upon the whitewashed walls, and the bunches of scarlet carnations set in glass goblets. The white wine of the place put before him, of the true color and flavor of the grape, and with a ring of delicate foam as it mounted in the cup, had a reviving edge or freshness he had found in no other wine."

Those who judge of Pater's writing by a few purple passages such as the famous rhapsody on the "Mona Lisa," conceiving it as always thus heavy with narcotic perfume, know but one side of him, and miss his gift for conveying freshness, his constant happiness in light and air and particularly running water, "green fields—or children's faces."

His lovely chapter on the temple of Æsculapius seems to be made entirely of morning light, bubbling springs, and pure mountain air; and the religious influence of these lustral elements is his constant theme. For him they have a natural sacramental value, and it is through them and such other influences that Pater seeks for his hero the sanctification of the senses and the evolution of the spirit. In his preoccupation with them, and all things lovely to the eye and to the intelligence, it is that the secret lies of the singular purity of atmosphere which pervades his *Marius*, an atmosphere which might be termed the soul-beauty of the book, as distinct from its, so to say, body-beauty as beautiful prose.

Considering *Marius* as a story, a work of imagination, one finds the same evocative method used in the telling of it, and in the portrayal of character, as Pater employs in its descriptive passages. Owing to certain violent, cinematographic methods of story-telling and character-drawing to which we have become accustomed, it is too often assumed that stories cannot be told or characters drawn in any other way. Actually, of course, as many an old masterpiece admonishes us, there is no one canon in this matter, but, on the contrary, no limit to the variety of method and manner a creative artist is at liberty to employ in his imaginative treatment of human life. All one asks is that the work should live, the characters and scenes appear real to us, and the story be told. And Pater's *Marius* entirely satisfies this demand for those to whom such a pilgrimage of the soul will alone appeal. It is a real story, no mere German scholar's attempt to animate the dry bones of his erudition; and the personages and the scenes do actually live for us, as by some delicate magic of hint and suggestion: and, though at first they may seem shadowy, they have a curious way of persisting, and, as it were, growing more and more alive in our memories. The figure of Marcus Aurelius, for example, though so delicately sketched, is a masterpiece of historical portraiture, as the pictures of Roman life, done with so little, seem to me far more convincing than the like over-elaborated pictures of antiquity, so choked with learned detail of Flaubert and of Gautier—Mr. Swinburne's famous praise of whose *Mademoiselle de Maupin* applies with far greater fitness to Pater's masterpiece; for, if ever a book deserved to be described as

"The golden book of spirit and sense,
The holy writ of beauty,"

it is *Marius the Epicurean*.

It has been natural to dwell so long on this "golden book," because Pater's various gifts are concentrated in it, to make what is, of course, his masterpiece; though some one or other of these gifts is to be found employed with greater mastery in other of his writings, notably that delicate dramatic gift of embodying in a symbolic story certain subtle states of mind and refinements of temperament which reaches its perfection in *Imaginary Portraits*, to which the later "Apollo in Picardy" and "Hippolytus Veiled" properly belong. It is only necessary to recall the exquisitely austere "Sebastian Van Storck" and the strangely contrasting Dionysiac "Denys L'Auxerrois" to justify one's claim for Pater as a creative artist of a rare kind, with a singular and fascinating power of incarnating a philosophic formula, a formula no less dry than Spinoza's, or a mood of the human spirit, in living, breathing types and persuasive tragic fables.

This genius for creative interpretation is the soul and significance of all his criticism. It gives their value to the studies of *The Renaissance*, but perhaps its finest flower is to be found in the later *Greek Studies*. To Flavian, Pater had said in *Marius*, "old mythology seemed as full of untried, unexpressed motives and interest as human life itself," and with what marvelous skill and evocative application of learning, he himself later developed sundry of those "untried, unexpressed motives," as in his studies of the myths of Dionysus—"The spirit of fire and dew, alive and leaping in a thousand vines"—and Demeter and Persephone—"the peculiar creation of country people of a high impressibility, dreaming over their work in spring or autumn, half consciously touched by a sense of its sacredness, and a sort of mystery about it"—no reader of Pater needs to be told. This same creative interpretation gives a like value to his studies of Plato; and so by virtue of this gift, active throughout the ten volumes which constitute his collected work, Pater proved himself to be of the company of the great humanists.

Along with all the other constituents of his work, its sacerdotalism, its subtle reverie, its sensuous color and perfume, its marmoreal austerity, its honeyed music, its

frequent preoccupation with the haunted recesses of thought, there goes an endearing homeliness and simplicity, a deep human tenderness, a gentle friendliness, a something childlike. He has written of her, "the presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters," to whom all experience had been "but as the sound of lyres and flutes," and he has written of "The Child in the House." Among all "the strange dyes, strange colors, and curious odors, and work of the artist's hands," one never misses "the face of one's friend"; and, in all its wanderings, the soul never strays far from the white temples of the gods and the sound of running water.

It is by virtue of this combination of humanity, edification, and esthetic delight that Walter Pater is unique among the great teachers and artists of our time.

RICHARD LE GALLIENNE.